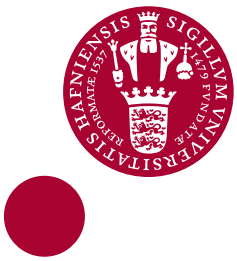

(Asian) Life (in Asia) - Book reviews of Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner (Ed.): Frameworks of Choice, Amsterdam, Amsterdam Press 2010 and Aihwa Ong & Nancy Chen: Asian Biotech, Durham & London, Duke University Press 2010

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(Asian) Life (in Asia)

Reviews of:

Sleeboom-Faulkner, Margaret (ed). 2010. *Frameworks of Choice: Predictive and Genetic Testing in Asia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 271

Ong, Aihwa & Chen, Nancy (eds). 2010. *Asian Biotech: Ethics and Communities of Fate*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 335

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Two recently published edited collections examining the global unfolding of the life sciences provide us with an excellent opportunity to reflect firstly, on what might be thought of as a kind of geopolitics of analysis; secondly, on a very evident Foucault effect among anthropologists of Asia; and finally, on how to conceptualise (bio-)ethics amidst a global expansion of life science practices. Contributing scholars in Sleeboom-Faulkner's *Frameworks of Choice* empirically examine how biotechnological practices of predictive and genetic testing are unfolding "in Asia" while, in Ong & Chen's *Asian Biotech*, a range of 'Asia rising' case studies are leveraged to theorise how biotechnology – as a sphere of scientific imagination and endeavour – has become "Asian". At the same time, upon reading the two books in tandem, one cannot help but be struck by the importance that Foucauldian thinking continues to muster in social scientific analyses of life (science) in Asia. And, in tracking the emergence of biotechnology in Asian countries, both books critique universalist bioethics, suggesting instead that any forms of life science ethics must be grounded in local contexts.

For two books which take the exact same point of departure[1], they articulate and demonstrate two strikingly different analytical strategies which are captured in the very titles of the books. What is the point of studying Asian biotechnology as opposed to biotechnology in Asia, and vice versa? The most immediate way to distinguish *Asian Biotech* from *Frameworks of Choice* would be by invoking the "bench" and "bedside" so often used to situate the life sciences today. If Ong, Chen & co. set their analytical gaze upon the high tech laboratories and clinics in countries like China, Japan and India, then Sleeboom-Faulkner's is a volume dedicated to the practice of genetic science at the 'bedside' in these same countries. That is to say, whereas informants in *Asian Biotech* tend to be the scientists and clinicians involved in developing the life sciences in Asian countries, informants in *Frameworks of Choice* are the community members, clinicians and nurses involved in prenatal genetic testing or population screening programmes.

[1] Indeed, to the extent of sharing almost identical opening lines: "The dispersal of genetic science across the world…" (Ong & Chen); "The rapid global expansion of predictive and genetic technologies…" (Sleeboom-Faulkner).

Yet this bench-bedside contrast does not in fact provide us with any clues as to how to approach this geo-political question of 'Asian biotech' vs. 'biotech in Asia'. Instead, we need to look more closely at how the authors sketch out the task of their books. Ong, Chen and co. set about identifying a "configuration of common interests and imagination that we call 'Asian biotech'" (p. 24), while Sleeboom-Faulkner and co. focus on one particular form of biotech – genetic testing, both predictive and prenatal – in an effort to identify the "circumstances and socio-economic backgrounds in which people decide to undergo a test… referred to here as *frameworks of choice*" (p. 12, emphasis original). Perhaps the most prominent theme in *Asian Biotech* is that of nation-building, whether in an analysis of the 'Koreanness' of fallen stem cell scientist Hwang Woo Suk who had suggested that dexterous Korean chop stick users had sharpened the cell work done in his laboratory (Charis Thompson's chapter, p. 106); capacity building efforts to bolster an 'Indian' clinical research infrastructure as a way to attract lucrative multi-centred clinical trials to the country (Kaushik Sunder Rajan's chapter); the drive to "establish human Embryonic Stem cell lines with the genetic characteristics of the Taiwanese" (Jennifer Liu's chapter, p. 251); or the demarcation of 'Chinese DNA' as a measure of 'Chineseness' where the "introduction of genomics since the 1990s… adds another spin to the discourses and practices on China's ethnic categorization" (Wen-Ching Sun's chapter, p. 265). As such, this approach to biotech might best be summarised as an enquiry into the ways in which biotechnology as a scientific practice harnesses and aligns with ongoing nation-building efforts (which have long been fuelled by confidence in science and technology) throughout Asia, that is to say biotechnology which quite palpably contributes to the negotiation and production of 'Asianness'.

Frameworks of Choice, on the other hand, is concerned with the ramifications of biotechnological practices in Asia. In this book's chapters, it is not so much the making of (Asian) biotechnologies that is at stake, but rather the grounding of biotechnologies into different, often socially uneven, country contexts and all the unintended consequences that ensue. Who would have imagined, for example, that Thalassemia screening programmes in rural India – which aim to assist families with a history of Thalassemia in their reproductive planning – could have a devastating impact on the marriage practices of families in Chhattisgarh villages when test results come to be communally known[2] (Prasana Kumar Patra's chapter)? Or, what happens when advanced prenatal genetic tests are provided in socio-economic contexts such as Sri Lanka's where potential treatments are all but inaccessible often resulting in glaring 'therapeutic gaps' (Bob Simpson's chapter)? This approach, in many ways, treats biotechnologies as a 'universal' set of techniques currently being used in different countries in Asia, opting instead to focus on the unintended effects of this use. To study biotechnology 'in Asia' is to draw attention to the fact that these techniques and practices are unfolding in contexts of cultural diversity, social unevenness and statist intervention. They have become a part of the daily life of many in Asia.

[2] "[I]f the test result is positive, we will face difficulties finding a suitable boy for her" remarks one of Patra's informants.

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Between the two books, authors cite a total of eleven Foucauldian texts (more than any other social theorist), not to mention many references to the work of Paul Rabinow, Nikolas Rose and Ian Hacking. While *Asian Biotech* is clearly the one with a marked Foucauldian bend, the notion of 'frameworks of choice' is also in part attributed to thinking derived from Foucault's work on governmentality (especially Jyotsna Agnihotri Gupta's chapter, see also p. 223). As such, these books are yet more testimony to what, by now, might as well be described as a 'school' within the anthropology of Asia. Over the last couple of decades, anthropologists working in Asia have increasingly invoked (and revised) Foucauldian notions of especially biopolitics and governmentality in their analyses and accounts of, for example, education programmes, employment practices, anti-smoking campaigns, population planning policies, biotech booms, herbal medicine revivals, prenatal screening programmes and the like in various Asian countries (e.g. Greenhalgh & Winckler 2005; Kipnis 2011; Kohrman 2004; Sleeboom-Faulkner 2010; Ong 1998; Sunder Rajan 2006; Gottweis 2009; Wahlberg 2006; Gammeltoft 2007). Yet these concepts were developed through Foucault's analyses of the emergence of modern power/knowledge configurations in 18th and 19th century Europe. How is it then, that they have become so relevant in scholarly studies of social processes and practices in contemporary Asia?

On the one hand, it should be noted that, in deploying the concept of bio-politics in the context of analyses of new biotechnologies, *Asia Biotech* and *Frameworks of Choice* are speaking with (and referencing) a growing body of literature that has argued – in 'Western' contexts – that the most pertinent and potent sites for studying the administration of life in the 21st century are to be found in and around the 'new' life sciences of genomics, regenerative medicine and neuroscience (e.g. Rabinow 1999; Rose 2006). Somewhat in contrast, earlier deployments of the concepts of bio-politics and governmentality by anthropologists working in Asia focused on 'old school' public health, educational, demographic and/or epidemiological technologies of government. It is these latter programmes which arguably remain much more potent as sites of life administration in Asian countries and, consequently, however hyped/pervasive biotechnologies have become in Asia, we should as a minimum ask ourselves where we should be looking if we are analytically interested in the government of life in Asia today. On the other hand, it is not at all difficult to grasp the relevance of the concepts of bio-politics and governmentality for scholars working in Asia when we remember that it was the figure of the 'population' and the place of expert bodies of knowledge (disciplines or sciences) in the configuration of modern power/knowledge relations that spurred these concepts. Anyone with even the mildest of interest in Asia scholarship will have noticed that science, modernity and population remain vitally constitutive of various forms of politics – from geo-politics to identity politics and bio-politics.

This is certainly the case, as we learn, when it comes to the development and deployment of life sciences within Asian countries today. Advanced biotechnologies are being used to screen as well as genomically characterise populations in Taiwan, China, South Korea, Singapore and more. Such national biotech projects have become part of a global 'prestige game' or 'race' (who will be the

first to…). Notions of progress, scientific advance and development continue to organize national, state-led development programmes. Etc, etc. Still, as already noted, amidst the hype and bustle of 21st century biotech, we will do well to remind ourselves of what Foucauldian concepts of bio-politics and governmentality allow us to do, namely to genealogically and archaeologically map out how life and its mechanisms continue to be rendered calculable and manageable (as objects of expert bodies of knowledge) and thereby become amenable to intervention, in different configurations of knowledge/power. While life is certainly the object of the biological life sciences, there are many other forms of life that remain crucial in Asia, just as in other parts of the globe.

Both Ong & Chen and Sleeboom-Faulkner note in the introductions to their two volumes on biotech, that part and parcel of the globalisation of genomic science and technology has been a parallel globalisation of forms of (bio-)ethics. Ethics and biotechnology cannot be separated. Yet both books set out to critique what are described as "universal systemic ethics" (Ong & Chen, p. 12) or Asia's "new bioethics" (Sleeboom-Faulkner, p. 12). Ong calls for anthropological analyses of "situated ethics", proposing to approach ethics not as (a search for) universal principles, but rather as processes of "ethicalizing" and moral reasoning (pp. 12-14). Sleeboom-Faulkner & co., on the other hand, are not so much interested in critiquing 'universal' bioethical principles and guidelines as they are in critically and ethnographically examining the extent to which such guidelines are implemented (or not) in practice, how they are put into operation (e.g. through consent procedures) as well as their unintended effects as a way to "offer the possibility of understanding the consequences that technologies have in circumstances that are 'multipartite, relational and complex'" (Bob Simpson, p. 28).

In this way ethics are not 'just' those principles which allow us to diagnose certain practices – e.g. recruitment of impoverished patients into clinical trials in India, genetic testing in contexts where therapeutic options are limited in Sri Lanka or coercion of female laboratory workers into oocyte donation in Korea – as problematic. "Instead of proceeding from a position of moral certitude to make judgements about particular ethnographic situations or seek to remedy them according to a universal set of ethics," writes Ong (p.13) "an anthropology of ethics is necessarily about locating ethical practices, that is, tracking ethical configurations where 'ethicalizing' processes and decisions take place." Ethics, then, are situated, relational and empirically-grounded; they emerge out of ethicalizing processes. It is this shift from principles to processes that is apparent in both books. Yet the two books give very different examples of where an anthropologist should go in order to track these processes – should it be to Ministry offices, laboratories and cutting edge clinics or to villages, town hospitals and family homes, or perhaps all of these?

For many of the reasons outlined in this review, *Asian Biotech* and *Frameworks of Choice* should be read together, they are in fact very complementary, providing us with ethnographic insight on a number of scales and within a number of arenas, from bench to bedside. Still, although Ong & Chen and Sleeboom-Faulkner have succeeded in streamlining the analytical intentions of their edited volumes, both volumes suffer from an unevenness in terms of the depth, richness and,

frankly, amount of empirical material informing the different chapters. Can we analyse from afar, on the basis of multi-sited travels, through in-depth studies of particular laboratory sites? And if so, how and what can we analyse? Negotiating access in biotech and/or clinical contexts – as indeed in any other field – takes time, and amidst this ongoing global biotech 'boom' where events continue to unfold rapidly perhaps more time is needed, whether in the laboratories, clinics, government ministries, cities or villages within which biotechnologies are currently unfolding.

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